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In search of explanations: a rejoinder to Borkenau

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Abstract

The main points raised by Borkenau against our challenge of the 'intuitive psychometrics' view of personality judgements are discussed, in particular his example of the link between school grades and intelligence. It is argued that the semantic similarity interpretation advanced in our paper is more adequate and more parsimonious than explanations in terms of psychometric reasoning.

In his reply to our paper (Semin and Krahé, 1988), Borkenau (1988) takes objection to our position that alleged 'ratings of consistency' by lay persons may be traced back to the persons' competent use of their native language rather than to some sort of intuitive psychometric knowledge. We would argue that the criticisms raised by Borkenau miss the central points of our argument as well as our data. First of all, his claim that 'lay persons (and psychologists) are accurate in some respects and inaccurate in other respects' (p. 253) is too much of a truism to be seriously disputed by anyone. However, this is not the point at issue in our criticism of the Epstein and Teraspulskey (1986) study nor in the two studies reported in our paper. What is at issue, rather, is the question of whether it is necessary or conceptually appropriate to draw upon such notions as 'accuracy' or conformity to 'psychometric principles' in order to account for the pattern of findings reported by Epstein and Teraspulskey. We have presented evidence suggesting that this kind of 'psychomorphism' overlooks the crucial role of linguistic factors in people's judgements about personality statements and moves on too readily to the level of psychological, i.e. individualized interpretations.

Essentially, language has been a poor partner in our conceptualizations of a number of different domains and in particular personality, social cognition, and the interface between the two. It is only recently that a range of studies have begun to tackle these issues. No doubt some of the seminal work in personality was inspired by general assumptions about language, as in the cases of Allport and Cattell. However, what a more detailed analysis of language had to offer or reveal was not to be explored at the time or even later, chiefly due to the philosophy of science

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subscribed to and the methodological dicta derived therefrom. This was mainly due to the implicit if not explicit assumption that language is imprecise, thus vague and inadequate as a medium in its own right (Semin, 1987). It is only recently that a number of systematic studies are attempting to examine the implications of different linguistic categories in the interpersonal domain for cognition and personality (e.g. Semin and Greenslade, 1985; Semin and Fiedler, 1988) and the cognitive organization and properties of traits (e.g. Chaplin, John and Goldberg, 1988; Hampson, John and Goldberg, 1986). Thus, the interesting case is proving to be the interface between properties of language and the contribution of such properties to judgements in the personality domain. A further step may be to examine which aspects of such judgements contribute to what is actually examined and represented by psychometric procedures. In fact, there are already some studies documenting what it is in ordinary language and in descriptions of self and others that psychometrics have modelled (see Rosch, Chassein, Semin and Krolage, 1984; Semin, Chassein, Rosch and Krolage, 1984).

A more careful examination of Borkenau's example of the link between school grades and intelligence—quoted in defence of the 'intuitive psychometrics' view—reveals a number of problems in his reasoning. First, there is the need to clarify his use of the term 'intelligence'. Within a short space, he refers to it alternately as IQ, 'individual differences in measured intelligence', 'ease of knowledge acquisition', or 'higher problem solving abilities of more intelligent persons'. The second point that needs clarifying is the rather disturbing reference to a 'causal relationship' between school grades and intelligence in the figure he presents, and the reference to 'actual correlation' in the text. We shall assume the latter rather than the former to be the correct reference to path *a* in the figure.

We can now attend to his distinction between 'terms' and their 'referents'. It is difficult to visualize or even think of a 'term' *in vacuo* because the semantic field as constituted by the diverse referents makes the term possible in the first instance—at least as a meaningful term. Thus, the so-called 'paths' *b* and *c* are meaningless, even on an analytical level. The meaning of the terms in question includes the diverse activities and achievements which make up the terms in the first instance.

Finally, Borkenau concludes that the correspondence between semantic similarity and expected correlation between intelligence and school grades 'may very well be spurious' (p. 256). The basis for this claim is his belief that judges 'can obviously consult additional sources' other than linguistic ones to assess the relationship between the two concepts. Again, one would not dispute this claim in such general form. However, if applied to the case at issue, namely whether Epstein and Teraspulsky's data on lay persons' psychometric knowledge may be explained more appropriately in terms of semantic similarity, it fails to meet its purpose of defending the 'intuitive psychometrics' view. If the judges in Epstein and Teraspulsky's study had consulted their intuitive psychological knowledge over and above their semantic knowledge, then this additional source of information should have found reflection, in one way or another, in their judgements. However, this does not appear to be the case. What we have as their main empirical evidence are the correlations between alleged consistency ratings and actual empirical relationships. Our two studies have shown that (a) the correlations between semantic similarity and empirical consistency are about as high as those between alleged estimates of consistency and empirical consistency reported by Epstein and

Teraspulsky and (b) that semantic similarity and alleged estimates of consistency are highly correlated. Therefore, we would argue that inferences about additional sources of information purportedly guiding subjects' judgements cannot be derived from the available data and therefore remain purely speculative. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that information about observation base (1 day vs. 30 days) does not affect ratings of semantic similarity. This shows that subjects in our studies did indeed rate the behaviour pairs in terms of their similarity in meaning as instructed without implicitly consulting other sources such as their intuitive psychological knowledge. Altogether, then, the semantic similarity interpretation would appear to be more parsimonious, as even Borkenau is prepared to accept that semantic similarity is integrally involved in judging the link between two concepts, be they school grades and intelligence or perceived relationships and empirical consistency.

In conclusion, we would argue that there is just one point in Borkenau's argument which may prove interesting, but this point is presented in reverse fashion. The question is how much of the variance in the results that are obtained can be explained by reference to language. The answer to this is, as our studies suggest, a substantial amount, namely at least as much as attributed to the operation of intuitive psychometric reasoning in the Epstein and Teraspulsky work. The interesting approach may not be to assume that the remaining variance is merely error but to advance a study in which there is a clear hypothesis about some process properties (may these even be process assumptions about lay psychometrics) and in which the variance postulated by the process model can be accounted for above and beyond or in interaction with the language-based contributors to personality judgements. Such a study would certainly contribute to knowledge rather than rhetoric.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les points les plus importants qui sont avancés par Borkenau contre notre critique de l'approche des jugements de personnalité en termes de connaissance, intuitive psychométrique sont discutés, et en particulier son exemple de la relation entre les notes scolaires et l'intelligence. L'interprétation en termes d'égalité sémantique, comme celle que nous avons avancée dans notre article, serait plus adéquate et plus parcimonieuse que des explications en termes de raisonnement psychométrique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Borkenaus wichtigste Einwände gegen unsere Kritik an der Interpretation von Urteilen über Persönlichkeit als Ausdruck intuitiven psychometrischen Wissens werden diskutiert, wobei besonderes Gewicht auf sein Beispiel des Zusammenhangs zwischen Schulnoten und Intelligenz gelegt wird. Die in unserem Artikel vorgeschlagene Alternativerklärung, die die Bedeutung der semantischen Ähnlichkeit für die Beurteilung des Zusammenhangs zwischen Persönlichkeitsaussagen hervorhebt, wird als angemessenerer und sparsamerer Erklärungsansatz postuliert.